The Sick Times

COVID-19 POLICY & ADVOCACY

How mask blocs are keeping communities safe with neglected government stockpiles

Posted by **Britta Shoot** – March 12, 2024

C.*, an organizer with the Charlotte Mask Bloc, poses with boxes of 3M N95 respirators purchased during a recent auction. Photo via Charlotte Mask Bloc.

One of the most effective ways to prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19, is to wear a well-fitting, high-quality respirator, such as a KN95 or N95 mask. But in 2024, it's not particularly easy to find effective masks in non-specialty stores, or at affordable prices, without buying large quantities at once.

As government and pharmacy programs that met this need earlier in the pandemic are winding down, mask blocs now exist to fill it. Mask blocs are grassroots mutual aid groups — and sometimes lone individuals — that distribute respirator masks for free, sometimes along with other pandemic-related supplies such as air purifiers and rapid tests. Many mask blocs organizers have personal experience

that motivate them to spend their time and limited funds sharing supplies with others in their communities, such as surviving on limited resources or living with a disability and/or Long Covid.

To supply plentiful, free masks to anyone who requests them, bloc members track down large quantities of quality masks being sold cheaply or offered for free. In this way, Covid-19 safety groups and mask blocs essentially function as narrow supply chains in specific regions, with bloc members focusing on distribution as well as acquisition. Groups track manufacturer discounts, for example, or search Craigslist for bulk sales of unused, unexpired masks.

In recent months, another option has emerged. State governments and other official groups, such as school systems and public utilities, have been auctioning off enormous quantities of unused N95s. Shortages earlier in the pandemic caused healthcare facilities and partner organizations to stockpile personal protective equipment (PPE). Now that supply chains have somewhat recovered and governments have lowered requirements for minimum PPE reserves, these entities are offloading the excess. Mask distribution organizers who were buying 500 N95s on eBay six months ago are now able to snag 15,000 masks for similar prices, purchased from water treatment facilities, elementary schools, and municipal and university surplus departments.

Mask bloc members note that some pallets of masks appear to have been warehoused since 2020 or 2021. N.*, a North Carolina organizer with the Charlotte Mask Bloc, says that while they appreciate being able to source large quantities at low prices, it's maddening to learn that institutions held onto stockpiles of life-

saving supplies for years without distributing them.

“I’m constantly feeling like: Wow, I have no degree or experience doing any work similar to this, and most mask bloc members I know are in a similar situation,” N. says. “Why the fuck are we being more effective and doing more education [than leadership in institutions]?”

***Editor’s note:** Organizers are identified in this story using initials only, as they requested anonymity in light of other professional and community work that they do outside of mask blocs.*

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These grassroots logistics projects — or at least these impressive quantities of warehoused respirators — might sound vaguely familiar. In December 2023, the *Associated Press* reported that state agencies were disposing of unused PPE including N95s, gloves, and gowns in vast, six-figure quantities. The story included quotes from some state agency representatives, who insisted they went to great lengths to donate and otherwise distribute excess supplies.

One agency, the Arizona Department of Health Services, is donating supplies

through a complementary PPE program. The department confirmed in February 2024 that N95 masks and Covid-19 test kits are still available for Arizona residents and organizations.

A., an organizer with Covid Safe Colorado, requested the ADHS minimum of 12 pallets — 57,000 Honeywell brand N95s — in the fall of 2023. Covid Safe Colorado officially formed last year when Covid-conscious Coloradans, already connected socially online, decided to form an activism-based arm of their group in response to masking protections being dropped in healthcare settings. Project N95 gave the group its first major infusion of 21,600 masks last fall. Quickly forming partnerships with libraries and like-minded groups such as free meals collective Food Not Bombs, CSC and its partners distributed that entire stockpile by the end of 2023. A. saw how high the demand for good masks was across the state and asked if neighboring Arizona would share some of its surplus.

But the ADHS program, like many auctions, required that groups take a considerable volume of masks at once. In a statement to *The Sick Times*, the Arizona Department of Health Services confirmed, “Due to the exorbitant cost associated with distribution, minimum requirements are in place and are dependent on the location and distance of the shipment.”

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For A., this exchange demonstrated that government supplies may be made publicly available if organizers can connect with officials either sympathetic to the cause or simply eager to empty a storage unit. “There *are* people in the government who care,” A. says. “They are trying to get supplies to places where they’ll be used.”

And the shipment did make it, even though snow blanketed Colorado on delivery day and half a dozen Covid Safe Colorado volunteers were delayed by the weather. A. and her spouse — the only CSC members with enough space to

accept the pallets — spent the day slowly moving as many of the boxes into their home as possible. When other group members arrived to assist the following day, they took thousands of masks back to distribution points in Arvada, Colorado Springs, and Fort Collins. Coloradans can request a box of 20 (or two) for free. Typically, one box of these masks retails for $37.

Distribution is a challenging task, but it's also an opportunity for connection and solidarity for organizers like A. "The rest of my life feels not so rewarding. I beg medical providers to mask. I'm trying to clean the air at my workplace. I beg family to test for the holidays. I see colleagues coming down with Long Covid. I worry about people. It's not a good feeling," she says.

"But it feels fun to be part of a caring community of people trying to help. There's so much resistance out there, but we get so many requests from people who want our help," she adds. "A lot of people appreciate what we're doing."

Interstate trafficking

A recent Iowa auction of 3M Auras, a popular style of N95s, provided many respirators to multiple mask blocs. "Auras are such a good quality N95 that the likelihood of them fitting an average person is extremely

Boxes of 3M respirators, purchased by Mask Bloc NYC, sit on the sidewalk in the snow. Photo via Mask Bloc NYC.

high," explains M., an organizer with Mask Bloc NYC. After no one bid at the auction, an organizer asked the auctioneer to sell the masks — a total of seven pallets, or 49,280 masks — to interested mask blocs outside of the auction platform. In total, masks that normally retail for over a dollar cost around $0.16 each, including shipping.

The logistical steps required for shipping such high quantities of masks represent a learning curve for many bloc members and can feel like a lot of labor to obtain supplies already procured once before by government entities. When one shipper hired for the Iowa transport job stopped responding, organizers scrambled to secure a second freight company. The cost was higher than the original estimate, but groups had already committed.

Charlotte Mask Bloc organizer C., who personally paid $2,225.50 for the group's two pallets of 14,080 masks, says that even if all the various organizers wanted to back out of the deal, there was no easy way out.

"I felt like it was very important that this [deal] happen since our bloc was the farthest southeast," C. says. (There are no other mask blocs currently operating on the Atlantic Coast between Charlotte and the state of Florida.) C. hopes that their group can inspire other mask blocs in the South, where institutional support for Covid-19 safety is limited: "I knew we could become an anchor for other groups to form, even if it was just for them to see what is possible."

Mask Bloc NYC bought four pallets of Auras from the same Iowa seller, a total of 28,160 masks at a total cost of around $4,000. When the shipment unexpectedly showed up three days early, organizers had no choice but to leave the snow-covered pallets on a residential sidewalk. They worried the masks might be ticketed or hauled away.

But the boxes drew unexpected positive attention from passersby. "One person took three boxes to the construction site where he works — and where PPE should be provided!" says M. "Other people took them to mail home to family members in other countries, where it's even harder to get masks. Someone came back multiple times and brought friends. Seeing about a thousand Auras get distributed this way was really wonderful."

Mask distribution as mutual aid

With limited energy to inventory or distribute masks, C. says putting up the payment to seed this initial investment is part of how she understands mutual aid. "Money is one of the few things I can offer at the moment," she says, noting the Charlotte Mask Bloc has many multiply disabled members who share tasks according to ability.

C. also has the space to warehouse the masks. “I have significant disabilities so it took me a week to bring them inside without injuring myself,” she adds. “I put a tarp over them in the meantime, and my partner — though he’s also disabled — helped finish it up before it rained.”

While all mask blocs are eager to acquire and distribute supplies, different groups have varying needs and priorities. M. from Mask Bloc NYC notes that some groups need specific, smaller quantities of masks, while others are buying up anything they can get. Because mask blocs are now tracking these auctions — and many blocs and individual supporters are in communication with one another — organizers generally agree that supportive members of the public should inquire with their local groups before, say, competing in a public auction that a bloc may happen to be bidding on as well.

If I can figure this out by myself and with not much money, what excuse does our government have?

H., MASK BLOC ORGANIZER

On a recent afternoon, California organizer H. won uncontested auctions for two pallets of rapid antigen tests, sold by a high school a two-hour drive away. There isn’t an official bloc or Covid-conscious community group where H. lives. But in

their region, they frequently find lots of low-cost masks to buy and send, at cost, to smaller blocs starting up around the country. The tests were a new gambit, and felt to H. like a rare opportunity worth seizing.

H. drove to inspect the tests before purchase, which ended up costing $245.82 for around 1,700 boxes of two tests each, or less than $.10 each for tests that typically cost around $10. Then, because most auctions don't offer delivery, they had to figure out how to transport the tests home on a weekday during business hours, the only time the sale site was open.

"These auctions can be prohibitive if you want to pick your stuff up yourself," H. notes. When a local rental company did not have the minivan H. reserved, a seemingly slight reduction in cargo space ended up doubling the trips needed to transport the tests. "The second day, I came home and took a four-hour nap," H. says. So far, they feel like the effort was worth it: at least four blocs expressed interest in receiving a case or two. That demand may increase, as the program to order free rapid tests from the U.S. Postal Service officially ended on March 8, 2024.

"I don't have any formal logistics experience," H. adds. "I'm just some person. But if I can figure this out by myself and with not much money, what excuse does our government have?"

Britta Shoot *is a San Francisco-based journalist and editor. She is writing a book about early HIV/AIDS pandemic civil resistance.*

*(**Full disclosure:** She is part of her local mask bloc in San Francisco, which has not followed or bid on any government auctions. Betsy Ladyzhets, who edited this story, has collaborated with Mask Bloc NYC through her band and obtained a care package from the group when she and her partner had Covid-19 earlier this winter. She has not been involved in any mask procurement or distribution effo*

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5 responses

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Oh hey! There is currently an effort to fundraise for another massive haul of KN95s. We are working with mask blocs in Champaign-Urbana, Tulsa, Knoxville, Cincinnati, New York City, Washington DC, Northern VA, Southern VA, New Orleans and MORE but we need your help. Please share our fundraiser WIDELY and contribute what you can.

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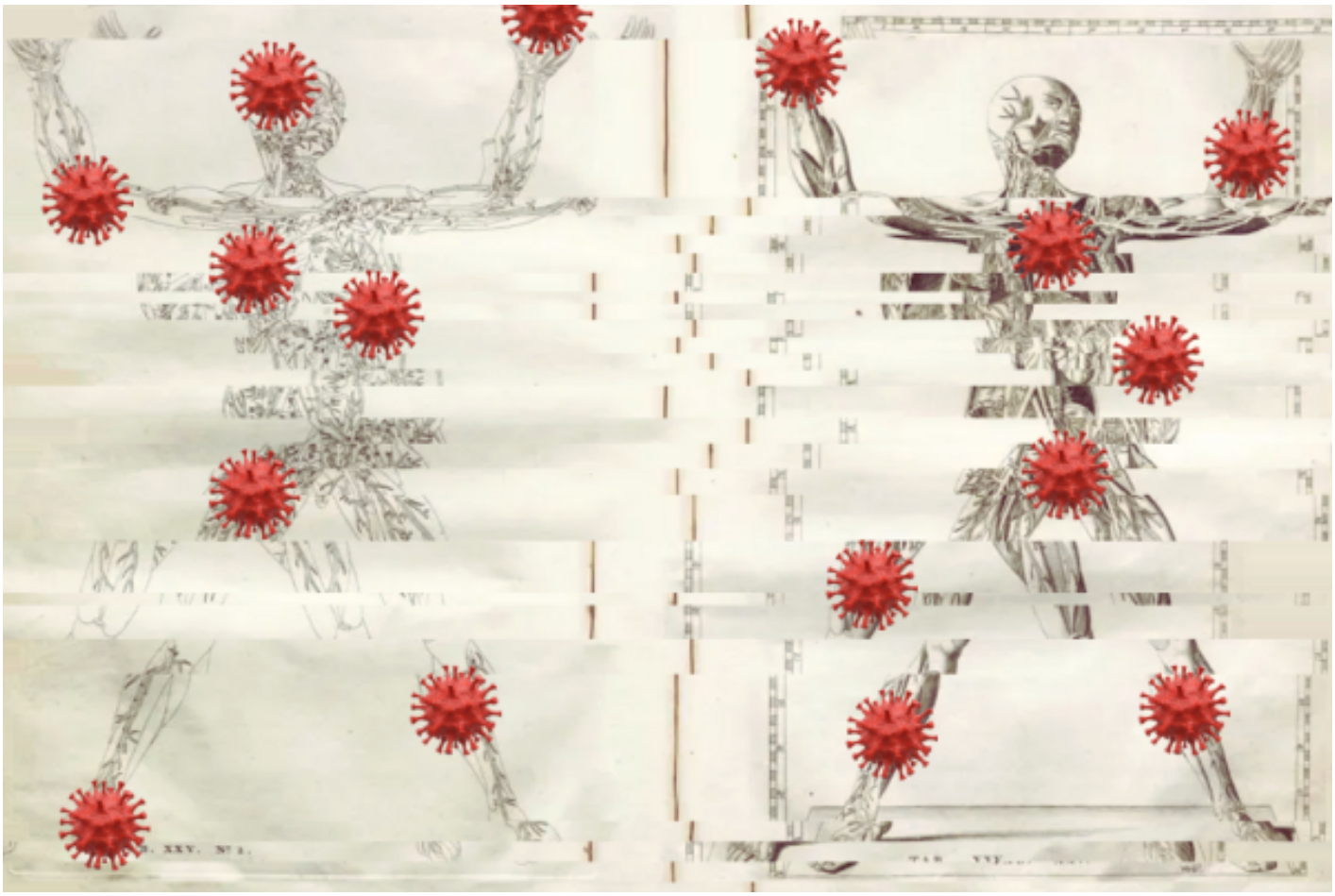

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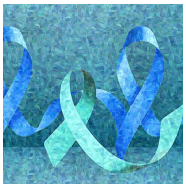

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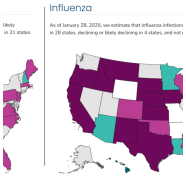

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